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POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

THE CRITIC'S SENSE OF HUMOR

In a recent interview in the *New York Times*, Mr. Robert Underwood Johnson, erstwhile editor of *The Century*, sums up his objections to what he calls the formlessness of modern poetry by an objection not based upon form, but spirit. This is what he says:

Now if anything is characteristic of the "prose librist" it is his lack of a sense of humor. A sense of humor is the finest critic the artist can have. Poetry, having the "high seriousness" that Arnold considers necessary to it, has not needed the guidance of the sense of humor, as for example, Wordsworth's great ode. But in the main a sense of humor is what keeps the poets as well as other people from making fools of themselves.

It is hardly true that a sense of humor will keep the poet from making a fool of himself; it will, however, permit the poet to *see* that he is making a fool of himself—from which he may derive a double satisfaction. If great poetry may be achieved without the guidance of a sense of humor, poetry is none the less great because of its presence; and if I had to choose between them as companions in the desert, I think I should take Chaucer and Shakespeare rather than Wordsworth and Milton.

But if "a sense of humor is the finest critic an artist can have," let's hope that the "prose librist,"—as Mr. Johnson calls Edgar Lee Masters, and also, by inference, Walt Whitman—let's hope that Mr. Masters tempers all the criticism he receives with at least as much humorous appreciation as that bestowed by this critic upon Mr. Masters' work.

Or is it possible that the "high seriousness" of criticism does not need the guidance of a sense of humor?